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The Catholic Church and the Early Stages of King Leopold II's Colonial Projects in the Congo (1876–1886)

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Abstract

In what follows I analyse the involvement of the Catholic Church in the early stages of King Leopold's colonial projects in the Congo. I argue that in a moment of particular political frailty and seduced by the unique missionary opportunities that the King's projects presented, the Holy See viewed the support for the Leopoldian projects in Africa as the only prudent decision. I demonstrate that, in Belgium, leading Catholic authorities promoted the King's projects in the Congo under the premises of nationalism and patriotism.

Résumé

J'analyse ici l'implication de l'église catholique dans les premiers temps des projets coloniaux du roi Léopold II au Congo. Je soutiens que dans cette période de particulière fragilité politique, le Saint-Siège, séduit par les opportunités missionnaires uniques qu'offraient les projets de Léopold II, a considéré le soutien à ces projets en Afrique comme la seule décision prudente. Je montre que, en Belgique, les plus hautes autorités catholiques ont promu les projets du roi au Congo au nom du nationalisme et du patriotisme.

Keywords

Catholic Church – King Leopold II – Catholic missions in the Congo – Conférence de Géographie de Bruxelles – Berlin Conference

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Mots-clés

Église catholique – roi Léopold II – missions catholiques au Congo – Conférence de géographie de Bruxelles – Conférence de Berlin

1 Introduction[1]

King Leopold II of the Belgians stands out as what one might call a unique personality in European colonial history. His "conquest" of the Congo was also unique as was his journey as a colonial ruler. Initially seen by many as a philanthropist, a selfless friend of the African people, his acclaimed altruism was all seeming. Moreover, he used that reputation to mastermind a particularly brutal regime in the Congo. There is no denying his grim legacy. Yet, Leopold enjoyed a great deal of international support and managed to keep his personal so-called État Indépendant du Congo (EIC) for decades. Governments across Europe and the United States of America took a very long time to raise opposition to the atrocities perpetrated by the Leopoldian regime. The Holy See and the leading Catholic authorities in Belgium showed even greater lethargy in that regard. They never truly opposed the regime. Only by its end, in the aftermath of the publication of the report by the famous Commission d'enquête in 1905, when the missionaries felt betrayed by their own King, did they dare to contradict their own previous accounts and criticise a few aspects of the regime.

In order to elucidate the involvement of the Catholic Church in the early stages of Leopold's colonial projects in Central Africa, I will focus on two pivotal moments, namely the King's colonial début through the Conférence de Géographie de Bruxelles (CGB) in September 1876 and the missionary mobilisation in Belgium in the immediate aftermath of the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885. By immediate aftermath, I mean the months that followed the closure of the Conference in 1885 and into the year of 1886, which is the chronological limit of this study. The focal point of the discussion will, thus, be the following (and intimately connected) elements: a) Leopold's agenda in gathering the

1 In this paper I use the following abbreviations: **AA** = African Archives; **AAM** = Aartsbisschoppelijk Archief Mechelen/Archiepiscopal Archive of Mechelen; **ANB** = Archivio della Nunziatura di Belgio; **ASCPF** = Acta Sacra Congregazione de Propaganda Fide; **AHIRCB** = Archive Historique de l'Institute Royal Colonial Belge; **AMFAB** = Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Brussels; **ARSC** = Académie Royale des Sciences Coloniales; **ARSOM** = Académie Royale des Sciences d'Outre-Mer; **ASCEP** = Archivio Storico della Congregazione per l'Evangelizzazione dei Popoli – Propaganda Fide (Rome); **ASV** = Archivio Segreto Vaticano; **SdS** = Segreteria di Stato.

CGB and how that agenda was perceived by the Catholic Church (meaning here the Holy See and the various Catholic circles in Belgium); b) the missionary race to the interior of Africa between Catholics and Protestants, triggered by the "Scramble", and c) the role of the rhetoric of the European-led anti-slavery struggle in Central Africa. Space does not allow for an analysis covering the large diversity of source materials. Here, I prioritise the main surviving written correspondence by secular and ecclesiastical agents and the reports by leading field missionaries. Monseigneur Charles Lavigerie's *Mémoire secret* (1878), an influential call to Catholic mobilisation in order to promote evangelisation and the anti-slavery struggle in Central Africa, receives a special attention.

2 The Rise of a "Humanitarian" Colonial Ruler

In 1885, the signatories of the Final Act of the Berlin Conference formally recognised Leopold's *Association Internationale du Congo* (AIC) as a sovereign political State. Although the claim that the AIC was "merely a label behind which there was no one but Leopold II" (Stengers, 1988: 230) is an exaggeration (Vanthemsche, 2012: 14–21), that *Association* was and had always been under his direct control. Thus, by recongnising the AIC's political sovereignty, the Berlin Conference recognised Leopold as the sole *legal* sovereign of what he and his auxiliaries had already been calling the *État Indépendant du Congo* (EIC) (Thomson, 1933: 216–241 and Crowe, 1942: 142–175). This new colonial State claimed jurisdiction over a vast territory (roughly the modern-day Democratic Republic of the Congo), estimated to be between seventy-eight and eighty times larger than Belgium. This territory became Leopold's own private property. Obviously, the Berlin's decision was a mere political deliberation and it should not be confused with Leopold's effective control on the ground, which, in 1885, was very limited, and, despite considerable growth in the 1890s, never reached its fulness.

The Holy See's support of Leopold's African projects is to be understood in light of the widespread European rhetoric of engagement with the cause of civilisation in Africa, which the monarch exploited to promote his colonial plans. That support, however, can only be fully grasped in light of a plethora of ecclesiastical, missionary, and political interests that the Holy See and the Catholic authorities in Belgium wanted to preserve or promote both in Europe and in Africa. A solid royal patronage was instrumental to the preservation and promotion of those interests and there was no better way to ensure such a patronage than to get in the King's good graces through an active and loyal cooperation with his colonial projects.

Leopold knew how to capitalise upon the European Zeitgeist. He made his début as a colonial player presenting himself as a humanitarian and managed to conceal to the eyes of most of his contemporaries the projects of a ruler fully engaged in the colonial race. Combining the humanitarian discourse with *Realpolitik*, Leopold managed to dazzle the Powers with the premises of internationalism. The territories under his management in Central Africa, he frequently promised, were to form an internationally managed colony where not only a humanitarian/civilisational agenda would be pursued, but also mechanisms would be enforced to boost the colonial economy and promote the interests of all parts involved. The King's rhetoric worked like a charm.

A political chameleon, Leopold easily adapted his ambitious colonial plans to the European discourse of *mission civilisatrice*, placing the anti-slavery struggle at the core of his humanitarian calling. Having picked the anti-slavery struggle and the promotion of civilisation in Central Africa as his hobbyhorse, Leopold only needed a credible venue to publicise his humanitarian agenda. Thus, he convened and chaired the so-called *Conférence de Géographie de Bruxelles* (CGB), which took place from 12 to 14 September 1876, in the royal palace of Brussels. With an international group of eminent geographers/cartographers, explorers and military experts, Leopold discussed his plans for a civilisational intervention in Central Africa, with the epicenter in the Congo Basin. He had no colonial ambitions, he assured his guests. All he wanted was to see Belgium committed to the promotion of civilisation in Africa, and Brussels becoming the headquarters of the civilising movement Europe had been called upon to lead.[2]

Before the closure of the Conference, the King's guests created the *Association Internationale Africaine* (AIA) and elected their host its president. The main priorities of this association, as established by its founders, were to open Central Africa to commerce, to carry out scientific expeditions, to eradicate the slave trade that infested the region and to promote peace among the local rulers. Leopold used this alleged international plan to foster his own colonial agendas. The CGB and the AIA conferred upon him a considerable international legitimation to put agents on the ground and, virtually unchecked, pursue his colonial ambitions in Central Africa (Emerson, 1979: 72–100 and Hochschild, 2006: 47–74).

2 AMFAB, AA Papiers Roeykens, D 4693, file nº 94.

3 The AIA and Leopold's Agendas in Central Africa: Catholic Perceptions

3.1 *The Holy See's Alignment with the AIA*

It is against the backdrop of the endorsement of (or at least the absence of any significant resistance to) Leopold's personal colonial projects among the European Powers and in the United States of America that the cooperative attitudes of the Holy See towards those projects are to be analysed and understood. Like the secular powers, the Holy See and the leading Catholic authorities in Belgium had interests to preserve and promote in the context of Leopold's African projects.

The "Scramble for Africa" in the last quarter of the nineteenth century coincided with a period in which the Holy See had lost virtually all of its concrete temporal power and had been relegated to what Andrea Ricardi called "the condition of 'guest'" (*condizione di "ospite"*) in international politics (Ricardi, 1996: 3–4). In this extremely adverse context, the religious missions assumed a particular relevance. They became the major leverage for the Holy See in its dealings with European colonial Powers. At least in theory, one of the priorities of European colonial rule in Africa was the promotion of civilisation, a task for which the assistance of the missionaries was indispensable. Besides, by the 1870's, European Powers already had a clear idea of how instrumental the works of the missionaries were in territorial claim and territorial consolidation. Like the rest of European colonial rulers, Leopold devoted a great deal of effort to ensure a direct involvement of religious missions (initially both Catholic and Protestant) in the works of the AIA, because he was aware that there could hardly be colonisation without religious missions. His colonial ambitions had a much greater possibility of success if the AIA capitalised upon the work of the missionaries for political purposes. Thus, the King promoted a certain alignment of the "stations hospitalières et scientifiques" under the AIA with the religious missions. In fact, some of those "stations" were conceived to support, accommodate and even be transformed into religious missions. In a letter of 25 November 1876, Serafino Vannutelli, the apostolic nuncio in Brussels, informed his brother Vincenzo Vannutelli, the substitute Secretary of State of the Holy See, that Leopold had assured him of the AIA's interest in having Catholic missionaries in its territories and that the Propaganda could send missionaries into Central Africa because the AIA planned to establish "stations hospitalières" and "it will not be difficult to transform these stations into missionary posts or residences".[3]

3 AMFAB, AA, Papiers Roeykens file D 4687, nº 78. Serafino Vannutelli to Vincenzo Vannutelli, 25 November 1876.

The missions' instrumental role in colonisation provided the Church with important leverage, but it should not be overestimated. If the interests of the secular and religious entities are considered, there was a mutual dependency. The agendas of the Catholic Church were essentially to expand its influence throughout the new territories, a goal that could not be accomplished without the protection and support of the colonial Powers. It is in light of these symbiotic interactions that the involvement of the Catholic missions in the European colonial projects is to be analysed and understood. The involvement of the Catholic Church in the Leopoldian projects in Africa was no exception. Accordingly, both the Holy See and the dominant circles of the Catholic church in Belgium followed Leopold's advances in Africa with great interest. The initial mistrust, reluctance or even opposition among some ultramontane circles in Belgium were overridden by the commitment of the Holy See and of the leading Catholic authorities in the country, who were, from the outset, loyal and cooperative partners in the Leopoldian colonial initiatives.

For the Holy See, Leopold's projects in Central Africa were a unique opportunity to reestablish the old missions of the Kongo Kingdom, abandoned since the departure of the last Capuchins, in 1835. The reestablishment of those missions had been in the plans of the Propaganda Fide, but it proved extremely difficult to materialise. The missionary collapse in the Kongo Kingdom was largely dictated by a series of socio-political transformations in Europe, especially by the ecclesiastical consequences of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars. By the second half of the eighteenth century, the growth of anti-clerical sentiments started inspiring hostile political deliberations against religious orders, starting with the Society of Jesus, whose members were expelled from some European countries. In 1773, Pope Clement XIV suppressed the entire Ignatian order. In the aftermath of the French Revolution and during the Napoleonic Wars, religious houses were closed in France and in many other parts of Western Europe, the Papal States were abolished, Pius VI died in prison, in France, in 1799. His successor, Pius VII, was also in prison and in exile for many years. The Propaganda Fide was, for a time, dissolved by Napoleon in 1809. In the Iberian Peninsula, the Napoleonic invasion of Spain and Portugal and the long Peninsular War disrupted the life of the Church. The French invasion dictated the retreat of King John VI of Portugal to Brazil, in 1807 (Hastings, 1996: 194–196 and Kabwita, 2004). Little more than a decade later, Portugal was taken by a liberal revolution of its own. The relations between the liberal governments of Portugal (which claimed jurisdiction over the Kongo Kingdom) and the Catholic authorities both in the country and in Rome were particularly tense. The few Capuchins still active in the Kongo Kingdom left in the aftermath of the suppression of the religious orders in Portugal on 30 May 1834

and refused to negotiate with Portugal. The relationship between the Holy See and Portugal in the decades that followed were filled with troubles, especially due to the clashes over the rights and jurisdictions of the Padroado (Jerónimo, 2012: 55–153).

After the peace of Vienna, in 1815, it took years before the Catholic Church returned to "institutional normality" (Hastings, 1996: 195). The great Catholic missionary revival that started in the 1840s/1850s did not have any significant impact upon Central Africa before the 1870s. Missionary leaders such as François Libermann (founder of the Missionaries of the Holy Ghost or Spiritans), Daniele Comboni (founder of the Verona Fathers), Melchior Bréscillac (founder of the Societé des Missions Africaines) and Charles Lavigerie (founder of the White Fathers) played an essential role in that revival. Of these congregations, however, only the White Fathers and the Spiritans managed to establish in Central Africa in the 1870s.

Their endeavour was all but easy. The Spiritans established in the coastal areas (such as Landana) from where they attempted to reach the interior. The White Fathers, after a first and failed attempt to cross the Sahara in 1876 (during which three of them were killed), reached the coast of East Africa, under the leadership of Leon Livinhac. Their destinations were Buganda, north of Lake Victoria, and, to the south of it, Unyanyembe (Hastings, 1996: 253–255). Gravely short on personnel and with little resources, both the Spiritans and the White Fathers found the advances towards the interior an unsurmountable challenge. It was, however, precisely by this time that Leopold was launching his operations in Central Africa and opening roads to the interior. The presence of the AIA in Central Africa was just the impulse the missionaries needed to be able to push into the hinterlands, an endeavour that had proved impossible for so long (Storme, 1951 and 1957). As Adrian Hastings aptly puts it, the Catholic missionary achievement between the middle and late nineteenth century had less to do with missionary methods than quinine, railways, and European administration (Hastings, 1996: 254). Accordingly, the Holy See had a strong reason to support Leopold's African projects.

Another element to understand the Holy See's backing of Leopold's colonial enterprises has to do with the anti-slavery struggle, a major component of the King's internationally acclaimed projects. Slavery in Africa was a practice Europeans related to a major competitor of the Christian faith – Islam. For the Catholic Church, seconding the royal projects meant embracing a unique opportunity to join (and capitalise upon) the popular European-led anti-slavery struggle in Africa and in the efforts to check the advance of Islam.

A strong incentive for the Catholic Church to rush into Central Africa at the dawn of the Leopoldian projects in the Congo was also the Protestant advances

to the interior of Africa. As Leopold launched his operations in Africa, the Protestant missionaries seemed to have quickened the pace to occupy mission stations in Central Africa. Inspired by Livingstone's achievement and ardent appeals to missionary engagement in Central Africa, groups such as the Livingstone Inland Mission, Church Mission Society, the Baptist Missionary Society and London Missionary Society started showing greater commitment to push towards the interior of Africa (Hastings, 1996: 250–253). The missionary race was on and the general feeling among the Roman Catholic field missionaries was that the Protestants were leading the race. Their advancement needed to be checked and for that the Roman Catholic missionaries had to rush to occupy strategic mission stations before it was too late (Slade, 1959: 22–37). On 30 April 1879, to give just one among many examples of this call to Catholic mobilisation, the Spiritan Hyppolite Carrie, stationed in the coastal mission of Landana, warned Schwindenhammer with these blunt words: "Understand, time has come for us to occupy Mboma if we do not want to give up the Congo altogether to the Protestants" (Roeykens, 1967: 195). Already on 13 September 1876, Serafino Vannutelli wrote to Cardinal Antonelli, Secretary of State of the Holy See, lamenting the overwhelming presence of the Protestants in the CGB. The presence of an influential Catholic missionary in that international gathering, the nuncio remarked, would have been very opportune "especially in order to sort out the question on how to permanently introduce the true banner of civilisation in the heart of Africa" (*soprattutto per risolvere la questione sulla maniera di piantare definitivamente nel centro dell'Africa il vero stendardo della civilizzazione*).[4]

Both the Holy See and Catholic missionaries had hopes that Leopold's CGB would result in a decision of promoting the evangelisation of Central Africa under the Catholic banner. The Catholic authorities in Rome were prudent in their dealings with the AIA. Although not satisfied with the organisation's ties with Protestants, Rome's lucidity was enough to see the big picture and preserve Catholic interests. Thus, Leopold's arrangements with the Protestants to ensure a smooth materialisation of his colonial plans did not cause much distress in Rome (or at least the distress was not displayed). The Holy See was fully aware that the open preferential treatment to the Catholic Church was no longer compatible with the rules of the game in international politics. Such treatment, especially at the early stages, was likely to meet with a fierce opposition of Powers of Protestant background, namely Great Britain and Germany,

4 ASV, SdS, anno 1878, rubrica. 256, fascicolo 1, fls. 245–246, Vannutelli to Antonelli, 13 October 1876.

in a position to check the monarch's projects in Africa. For Rome, it was better to have the Congo under a Catholic King (even if he cooperated with the Protestants) than to have it controlled by a Protestant Power.

The King's dealings with the Protestants divided Belgian Catholics. If moderate Catholics accepted the "neutrality" of the King's African projects, the ultramontanes and the liberals were much less keen to do so. The involvement of prominent Protestant figures in the CGB and in the creation of the AIA became, thus, a major point of contention, which quickly echoed in the ultramontane-oriented press.[5] The King's intention of promoting the Catholic faith in Africa was openly questioned. His true purpose, some expostulated, was rather to favour the Protestants.

The echoes of the criticisms of the King's African projects reached Rome and became a cause for concern there. On 11 October 1876, Baron August d'Anethan, the Belgian Minister to the Holy See, reported to Auguste Lambermont, the secretary-general of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Brussels, that Cardinal Antonelli

> regrets the carelessness of our intransigent Catholic press and, in particular, His Eminence has been very angry over the clumsy attacks of some extreme newspapers [*feuilles exagérées*] against the humanitarian work under the patronage of the King. The attitude of some of our bishops is far from pleasing him. It is the moment, more than ever, the Secretary of State of His Holiness told me, to be prudent, but one seems to forget that.[6]

While working on the national fronts, where Leopold managed to put the influences of leading Catholic authorities in Belgium (first among them, Victor Dechamps, archbishop of Malines, and Monseigneur Vannutelli) to good use, the King's collaborators urged to neutralise any negative impression that the polemics regarding the royal attitudes towards the Catholic missions might have caused in Rome. They ensured the Holy See that the reports of some members of the Belgian clergy and journalists on the King's alleged intentions

5 Among these personalities were Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen, Gustav Nachtigal and Georg Schweinfurth, from Germany and Henry Frere, Rutherford Alcock, Henry Rawlinson and Verney Cameron from the United Kingdom. Obviously, some claims that the Germans and British present at the CGB were Protestant should be taken with a pinch of salt. It was in the best interest of the opponents of Leopold's "neutrality" policy to emphasise the Protestant background of those men to make their case in Rome.

6 AMFAB, AA, Papiers Roeykens, file D. 4687 nº 78. Auguste d'Anethan to Auguste Lambermont, 11 October 1876.

of favouring the Protestants in the Congo were groundless. In fact, they contended, the King favoured the Catholic missionaries but such a favouritism had to be handled with the utmost care due to the constitutional strictures imposed upon him, for he was under the constitutional obligation to exercise discretion in religious matters. Some Catholics in Belgium, they explained, failed to grasp the intricacies of the problem, hence their hesitation in supporting the royal projects in Africa.[7]

For the authorities in Rome it was evident that the presence of the Protestants in the CGB and in the AIA was part of Leopold's neutrality strategy to ensure international support of his projects. Besides, Leopold had given clear signs that he never entertained the possibility of consolidating his colonial rule in the Congo without the assistance of Catholic missionaries. It was public knowledge that, in the immediate aftermath of the CGB, the King was already working to have the Scheut Fathers committed in the Congo (Lokando, 2016: 72). The Scheutists were short in number and had just accepted missions in Mongolia. They declined the proposal. Despite the declination on various occasions (only in 1886 did the Scheutists decide to accept the Congo mission), the royal invitation seemed appealing from the start, at least to the superior-general of the Congregation, Father Frans Vranckx. In a correspondence of 3 October 1876, Father Vranckx wrote that "from the religious standpoint the king's idea is magnificent. It is not only about converting and civilising millions of Negroes, but also about destroying the slave trade at its very root. His project is favourably received not only in Belgium but also throughout the whole of Europe. Thus, it deserves our most serious considerations".[8] Leopold used the Scheutists as intermediaries to approach the Jesuits and enlist their services in the Congo.[9] The contacts were established by the end of 1876. The Jesuits declined the invitation alleging a lack of available missionaries. Among the reasons they invoked was also the fact that the King's projects were not well regarded among certain circles of Belgian Catholics (Lokando, 2016: 72).

There is no doubt that Leopold's preference was to have Belgian missionaries in the territories of the AIA. As the reluctance and resistance of Belgian Scheutists, Jesuits, frustrated his plans, he had no choice but to rely on foreign Catholic missionaries already established in the region, namely Lavigerie's White Fathers and the French Spiritans. Even so, in the negotiations between

7 AMFAB, AA, Papiers Roeykens, file D. 4687 nº 78. Serafino Vannutelli to Vincenzo Vannutelli, 25 November 1876.

8 AMFAB, AA, Papiers Roeykens, D 4693, file nº 94: Frans Vranckx to Jacques Bax, 3 October 1876.

9 Archivum Romanun Societas Iesu – Belgicae 1004 (1872 to 1883). Father Jansens to Father Peter Beckx (superior of the Jesuits), 20 February 1879.

Leopold and Lavigerie, one of the conditions was that the archbishop of Algiers would give preference to Belgian members of his congregation in the deployment of missionaries into the territories of the AIA (Storme, 1952).

The feedback the nuncio in Brussels transmitted to Rome was encouraging. Initially Serafino Vannutelli was concerned about the AIA's ties with the Protestants and its impact upon the role of the Catholic missions in the King's projects. Leopold put his mind at ease with an assurance that an active involvement of the Catholic Church was indispensable to the projects of the AIA and the nuncio convinced the Holy See of the advantages of supporting the royal projects. On 5 December 1876, Cardinal Vincenzo Vannutelli, the substitute State Secretary of the Holy See, stated that Leopold's commitment in addressing the best ways to implement his civilisational agenda in Africa was all the more commendable because the King was aware of the instrumental role the Catholic missions could play in his project and, thus, seeks cooperation. The cooperation between the Church and the AIA, the prelate stressed, would serve a double purpose. It would be a boost for the papacy's project of propagating the Kingdom of God on earth, and it would allow the Church to take an active part in the task of releasing the miserable Africans from the maleficent slave trade and lead them to the true civilisation.[10]

By early December 1876, the Propaganda Fide had received word to send missionaries to the Congo. After some precautionary enquiries with field missionaries, the Propaganda started preparing the establishment of Catholic missions into the interior of Africa (Storme, 1976: 445–452). Rome was eager to send missionaries into the territories of the AIA. Pope Pius IX himself declared his support to the Leopoldian projects in Africa. On 5 December 1876, Baron August d'Anethan, Belgium's Minister to the Holy See, wrote to Count d'Aspermont Lynden about the meeting he had with the Pontiff the day before, and reported his enthusiastic support to Leopold's African projects:

> 'I largely agree with the King's ideas' – Pius IX told me – 'they seem good and very generous to me. I myself, while in America, was outraged when I saw slave markets. It would be a great achievement to destroy this dreadful trade and to open Africa to civilisation. The Catholic religion has only to gain. I am very willing to support the King's project. Please, do convey this and pass my compliments to him'.[11]

10 ASV, ANB 45, fascicolo 14 (unnumbered folio). Vincenzo Vannutelli to Serafino Vannutelli, 5 December 1876.

11 AMFAB, AA, Papiers Roeykens, file D. 4687 nº 78. Auguste d'Anethan to d'Aspremont Lynden, 5 December 1876.

Pius IX's support of Leopold's projects was to be expected. It is never too much to recall that the beginnings of the Belgian monarch's colonial maneuvers coincided with a troubled period for the papacy, profoundly weakened in the aftermath of the *Risorgimento*, which had transformed the pope into "a guest of a lay and anticlerical State" (Ricardi, 1996: 3). Pius IX needed all the support he could gather so he could get back on his feet. Seconding Leopold's African enterprises increased the chances of having the Belgian ruler on his side during those troubled days of his long reign. After all, since early 1870s, the Pontiff was clear that he counted on the King of the Belgians "in those difficult and stormy days that we are living in" (*in tempi così difficili e burrascosi come quelli che corrono*).[12]

3.2 *The Feedback of Field Missionaries*

In 1877, the Propaganda Fide called upon the leading field missionaries to pronounce on the opportunity of the Roman Catholic missionary implantation in the territories of the AIA. Their feedback is a clear proof that the support of the Holy See (the Pope, State Secretary and the Propaganda Fide) to Leopold's projects should not be confined to a mere political stratagem in times of trouble. That support was in line with the input the Holy See received from the field missionaries. Despite the suspicion with which they looked upon the AIA, due to its ties to the Protestants, the missionaries saw the presence of that organisation in Central Africa as a unique opportunity to foster the Catholic missionary implantation in the region (Storme, 1957).[13] Of these reports, the most detailed and programmatic is the one written by Monseigneur Charles Lavigerie, arguably the most influential Church leader stationed in Africa in the period under consideration. This document, thus, deserves special attention here.

I stated above that the rhetoric of the anti-slavery struggle in Africa was appealing to the Catholic Church. No document produced during the period under analysis mirrors such appeal better than Lavigerie's report. Written in Algiers on 2 January 1878, the fifty-five page document was titled "*Mémoire Secret sur l'Association internationale Africaine de Bruxelles et l'évangélisation de l'Afrique Equatoriale adressé à son Eminence le Cardinal Franchi, Préfet de la S.C. de la Propagande par le Mgr. L'archevêque d'Alger*". More than a report, it was a programme of action with clear plans on how the Catholic missionary

12 ASV, Archivio Particolare Pio IX, sovrani e particolari 142, fl. 190. Pius IX to Leopold II, 29 June 1871.

13 Cf. also AMFAB, AA, Papiers Roeykens, file D. 4687 nº 79. Ignace Schwindenhammer to Cardinal Franchi, 18 September 1877.

implantation was to be conducted and how to reap religious/missionary and political benefits from such an implantation.

Although the anti-slavery struggle was at the heart of Lavigerie's programme, slavery was not his only concern. He saw the increasing presence of the Protestant missionaries in Central Africa as a matter of serious concern. On 5 January 1878, reporting the advancement of the British Protestants in the territories of the AIA, Lavigerie warned the Propaganda Fide of a true Protestant invasion in certain parts of Africa (*nous assistons dans certaines parties de l'Afrique à une véritable invasion du protestantisme*).[14] This fact, he pointed out in his *Mémoire secret*, should be a true wake-up call to the Catholic Church to mobilise and spare no effort to ensure the growth of Catholic missions in the region.[15]

Like virtually all Catholic field missionaries, Lavigerie looked upon the AIA with suspicion. To his eyes, it was an organisation run by Protestants, freemasons and free thinkers. An element that was symptomatic of the AIA's lack of commitment with the religious interests, he observed, was the organisation's own flag: blue with a yellow star at the centre. "The cross", the prelate pointed out – "that, since eighteen centuries had been the standard of civilisation for all Christian peoples, had been discarded for the first time".[16] Despite all these lamentations, however, Lavigerie had no doubt that the presence of the AIA in the Equatorial Africa was an unprecedented opportunity for the Catholic Church, for it could use the facilities provided by that organisation and establish missions in so far unpenetrated regions with the necessary protection and general conditions to develop missionary work.[17]

Lavigerie's push for the Catholic missionary implantation in the Congo had clear political motivations. He saw in the Catholic implantation in Central Africa an opportunity for the Church to pursue a particular agenda: to hoist, in the name of the Church, the flag of the abolition of slavery (*arborer hautement, au non de l'Église, le drapeau de l'abolition de l'esclavage par la croix*). A politically inspired anti-slavery crusade was, thus, the leitmotif of Lavigerie's strategy to push Rome into what he considered an exhaustive and clever exploitation of the slavery problem in Central Africa. Bent on finding a gateway to better days for the Holy See, Lavigerie saw in Central Africa a sort of battlefront that the Catholic Church could use to surmount major problems it was facing in Europe, against societies increasingly hostile to the Church. In the fields of a region scarred by slavery and the slave trade, the Catholic Church could do much more

14 AMFAB, AA, Papiers Roeykens File D 4688 nº 80. Lavigerie to Franchi, 5 January 1878.

15 ASCEP, ASCPF anno 1878, vol. 246, fl. 196v. Lavigerie to Franchi, 2 January 1878.

16 Idem, fl. 203.

17 Idem, fl. 206.

than spread the Catholic faith. It could commit itself to a serious anti-slavery effort with which it would lever the papacy into a position of greater authority.

For Lavigerie, the reality on the ground indicated that, two or three years after the creation of the AIA, the Catholic Church had been provided with a true *kairos* to pursue an effective anti-slavery agenda and harvest its fruits. Although it was under the banner of the anti-slavery discourse that the AIA managed to gather such widespread support and esteem, he reminded Cardinal Franchi, the anti-slavery work had been abandoned or relegated to a secondary plan. The AIA had compromised its initial commitment in order to count on the cooperation of slave traders in Africa who controlled the main accesses to certain parts of the continent. It was, then, up to the Church to pick up the flag of the anti-slavery struggle and "hoist it high before the civilised world". The Church, he pointed out, cannot set foot in the interior of the Equatorial Africa "without seeking, by any means, to put an end there to the nameless horrors produced by the slave trade. From any standpoint, the Church only has to gain by paving this way of the gospel with resolve".[18]

He was convinced of benefits the Holy See would reap by launching an anti-slavery crusade in Central Africa. Chief among them he stressed the recuperation of the prestige of the papacy. An anti-slavery crusade was, to Lavigerie's eyes, a sort of panacea for the Church of Rome. That crusade was just what a Pope "prisoner in his own palace" needed to recover his authority and lead the Church through those difficult times. In his usual grandiloquent style, the Archbishop of Algiers endeavoured to persuade the Prefect of the Propaganda Fide:

> A pope condemning, in the name of the Gospel and of the invariable traditions of the Church, the horrors that dishonour a whole branch of the human family! [...] What profound emotion would seize the world to this display of power and moral grandeur! A papal Bull addressed to the leaders of the missions of Equatorial Africa announcing this great crusade of faith and humanity that would reclaim the honour for the Church; announcing the creation of an army of apostles to carry out such a crusade, marching to the death to save life, for the freedom of the poor children of Ham, would be one of the greatest things of this century and even in the whole history of the Church.[19]

18 Idem, fl. 22o.

19 Idem, fl. 22v.

Lavigerie managed to convince the Holy See of the urgency of establishing Catholic missions in the interior of Africa. But, shortly after he drafted his report, Pius IX died on 7 February 1878, and in July, Cardinal Alessandro Franchi died. Lavigerie had to take his crusade agenda to Pio IX's successor, Leo XIII. Despite his large-scale propaganda in Europe, Lavigerie achieved very little due to many and varied opposition. Leo XIII backed his plans,[20] but the truth is that the Catholic Church had little say in the definition of policies regarding the abolition of slavery. The secular powers were in control and little interested in involving the Church in the discussion. They put the Holy See on the sidelines in the Berlin Conference as well as in the Brussels anti-slavery Conference of 1889–1890. Besides, Lavigerie came to contemplate a military invasion of Central Africa as a means to fight slavery, an element that found little acceptance among European Powers. He also faced serious opposition within some influential missionary organisations of his own native France (La Bella, 2005 and Delisle, 2009). Lavigerie died in 1892, two years before the first scandal of State-sanctioned slavery in EIC broke out with the public denunciations of Monseigneur Prosper Augouard in 1894.

4 The Berlin Conference and the Missionary Mobilisation in Belgium

On 11 October 1887, Edmond Van Eetveld, State Secretary of the EIC, sent a paper clipping of the Parisian newspaper *Le Monde* to Leopold. It was an article titled "La politique colonial allemande et les missions" in which the author explained why colonial rulers should invest their own national missionary institutes:

> From the political point of view, – it was stated in the article – the governments are aware that the trust, esteem and love that the missionaries enjoy springs back to their own nation and brings it additional prestige and influence. It is from this standpoint that the work of the missions is essentially *patriotic and national* [italicized in the original], and the governments that grasp their real interests should favour as much as they can the establishment and expansion of their own missionary institutes.[21]

20 ASV, ANB, file 51, fascicolo 28. Mariano Rampolla to Domenico Ferrata, 20 October 1888.

21 Archive du Palais Royal (Brussels), Fond Goffinet, Correspondance Léopold II, nº 56. Van Eetvelde to Leopold II, 11 October 1887.

Van Eetveld just wanted to reassure his King that the EIC's policy of staffing its religious missions with as many Belgian nationals as possible was in perfect harmony with *modus procedendi* of the European colonial Powers. Discrimination of missionaries based on nationality or Creed was a violation of article six of the General Act of the Berlin Conference, which imposed on the Powers the obligation to protect and favour religious missions. Article six was, however, born as a dead letter. It stipulated what the Powers were not doing and what they did not intend to do. The equal treatment of all religious missions proved to be a mirage. Bent on capitalising upon the religious missions for political ends, the Powers made of the missionary implantation in their colonies a major national political dossier. In the context of European colonisation in Africa (or in other parts for that matter) religious missions were a double-edged sword: they were an undeniable asset, but they could also be a liability. The best ways the Powers found to minimise eventual liabilities linked to religious missions was to favour the congregations most committed to their cause, but especially their own national congregations. The practice increased the chance of having loyal patriotic missionaries in their colonial possessions. Despite the rhetoric, foreign missionaries were almost never welcome because there was a general belief that they would promote the cause of their own country to the detriment of the country in whose colonies they worked.

In Leopold's newly recognised EIC things were not different. In the beginning, he had no choice but to work with foreign missionaries because the mobilisation of Belgian missionaries proved extremely difficult. Since the late 1870's the monarch worked hard to ensure that his African territories be staffed with as many Belgian missionaries as possible. By the closure of the Berlin Conference, Leopold was making greater and greater efforts to ensure a supply of Belgian missionaries so that he could afford to get rid of as many foreign missionaries as possible. He saw it as a necessity if he wanted to keep a strong grip on the Congo. Foreign missionaries would only be consented to in cases where he expected to secure political benefits (as it was in the case of the missionaries of Mill Hill to appease the British) or when they were needed to cover the shortage of Belgian missionary personnel (as it happened with Lavigerie's White Fathers, but here still he insisted that Belgian White Fathers were given preference).

The King's task was not easy. Upon the closure of the Berlin Conference, in 1885, the presence of Belgian missionaries in the territories of the EIC was insignificant[22] and he saw the missionary configuration in the region as a threat

22 In the early days of European rule in Central Africa there were only few Europeans and even less Belgians in the Congo. By 1890, Belgian nationals represented approximately

to his political goals. And rightly so. The White Fathers, under Lavigerie, and the Spiritans, under Prosper Augouard, were the two dominant Catholic congregations in the region. Not only were both congregations French-based (and France was Leopold's direct competitor in the region) and occupied some of the most relevant mission stations, but also their leaders were committed to the French colonial cause in Africa. Both Lavigerie (with whom Leopold was forced to work but whom he never trusted) and Augouard were astute missionary leaders and had been doing France's bidding in the region for quite some time (De Witte, 1913: 25–29 and Gründer, 1988: 90–97). Augouard reported with pride to his parents how instrumental he was assisting to Savorgnan de Brazza in the consolidation of France's territorial claims in Central Africa (Augouard, 1905: 301–303). It is not a coincidence that, in 1894, when he denounced State-sanctioned slavery in the territories of the EIC, Belgian missionaries used his known nationalistic zeal (which they even labelled as chauvinistic) to discredit him.[23]

Naturally, Leopold saw the absence of Belgian-based religious orders or of Belgian missionaries in his territories as a serious problem. The monarch had been counting on the support of the Baptist Missionary Society (which he had been paying handsomely) but that was simply not enough. The way he and his collaborators saw it, the success of the Congo enterprise was contingent upon the replacement of French missionaries in the territories of the EIC with Belgian missionaries and the creation of an ecclesiastical jurisdiction in those territories to be put under the leadership of a Belgian national. Thus, in the run-up to the Berlin Conference, Leopold worked on a project of the foundation of a seminary in Louvain to supply Belgian nationals to fill the ranks of the missionary staff in the Congo. Upon the closure of the Conference, he acted swiftly to engage the efforts of the Roman Catholic authorities in Belgium as well as those of the Holy See to mobilise the Belgian clergy to help him materialise the seminary project. The task seems to have become somehow easier with the King's victory in Berlin. In Belgium, the Archbishop of Malines/Mechelen, Pierre-Lambert Goossens, viewed the formal recognition of the EIC as "*la grand conquête que va enregistrer l'histoire, conquête pacifique, également profitable*" for both the Congolese people and the AIA.[24] He committed personally

forty percent of the total white population in the Congo. A great number of EIC officials were hired in France, Great Britain, Italy and in the Scandinavian countries (cf. VANTHEMSCHE, 2012: 279–280).

23 For detailed source materials on the slavery controversy brought about by Mgr. Augouard's denounces, see ASV, ANB 55, fasc. 18.

24 AAM, Cardinal Goossens (1884–1906), file nº 115. Cardinal Goossens to Leopold II, 16 March 1885.

to persuading both his clergy in Belgium and the authorities in Rome to see that the seminary project succeeds. The Holy See also welcomed the Berlin Conference's decision and by 1886, Leo XIII gave Leopold the monopoly of the evangelisation of the territories of the EIC and backed the project of a seminary for the Congo. The main forces conjoined. By September 1886 the seminary opened its doors (Storme, 1952).

On 16 November 1886, a letter signed by the Belgian bishops notified the Belgian clergy of the Holy See's call for engagement with the missionary cause in the EIC. The document was an ardent appeal to the patriotic sentiments to galvanise potential missionaries and persuade them to enter the newly found seminary in Louvain where they would receive the necessary training to take the light of the gospel to the Congo. As the Church joins the secular powers, the document stressed, the civilising work in the Congo would become truly national, "one of the glories of Belgium in our times and of the reign of Leopold II". Those who were feeling they were called to apostolate had now the opportunity "to bravely follow in the footsteps of many Belgian heroes who had sown the good seed throughout all the countryside and who made the Lord's field produce a bountiful harvest".[25] To the eyes of the author of an unsigned remark on this letter preserved in the archiepiscopal archive of Mechelen, the civilising movement with its headquarters in Brussels was a unique opportunity for the Church to expresses its Catholic calling and endeavour to make Christians wherever there are human beings.[26]

Rome also spared no effort to help Leopold with his plan of replacing French missionaries with Belgian missionaries. Thanks to the intervention of Pope Leo XIII, Leopold finally managed to convince the Scheut Fathers to embrace his African endeavour. In their general chapter of May-June 1887 the Scheutists officially accepted the mission of the Congo. Leopold had, thus, the first Belgium-based congregation committed to the Congo. His negotiations with the Jesuits did not produce an agreement before 1891–1892.

In Belgium, leading Catholic authorities promoted Leopold's rhetoric of the national prestige and glory Belgium was destined to harvest if its brave sons and daughters showed commitment to the cause of the Congo. Using its powerful channels of influence and under the premises of patriotism and national prestige, the Belgian Catholic clergy promoted Leopold's Congo project as an honourable and profitable national project to which all good Catholics were expected to show support and commitment. Taking or showing support to

25 Cf. AAM, Cardinal Goossens (1884–1906), file nº 117. "Au Clergé Belge", 16 November 1886.
26 AAM, Archive of Cardinal Goossens, file nº 117.

those who take the light of the gospel to the Congolese now under Leopold's rule became a Christian and a patriotic duty. Belgians were invited to look at the Congo as an extension of the homeland. That being so, the Belgian Church and nation had a special responsibility to do what was in their power to see the light of the gospel and civilisation taken to the Congolese. As L. Le Roy, president of the Grand Séminaire de Liége, wrote in July 1889 in a fund-raiser pamphlet for the missionaries, "Congo is a land that if it is not Belgian, seems destined to become soon; to be adopted by the Motherland and be watered by the sweat and blood of her purest and most generous children. Congo is a providentially open land to the civilising action of the Belgian nation and of the Church in Belgium" (Le Roy, 1889: 2).

Leopold wanted a Belgian missionary staff in the Congo because it was more compatible with the strategy of capitalising upon the religious missions to foster political agendas. Accordingly, despite the discourse of an international colony, especially after his EIC was officially recognised in Berlin, he invested heavily on the promotion of a Belgian missionary staff for his African territories and he had the full backing of the Holy See to materialise his plans. Judging by the King's behaviour in summer of 1886, it is plausible to conclude that his démarches to ensure a national missionary staff in the Congo was making significant progress. By then Leopold was asking Rome to order the withdrawal of both French Spiritans and the White Fathers of most of his territories. In a letter sent to Rome dated 4 September 1886, Domenico Ferrata, apostolic nuncio in Brussels, attached a document he had received from the authorities of the EIC in which the King's plan is clearly stated to staff the religious missions throughout the African territories under his control with Belgian missionaries alone (*Sa Majesté désire établir exclusivement et le plus tôt possible des prêtres Belges dans toute la partie de l'État ou existent actuellement des stations occupées par ses nationaux*).[27]

To ensure the accomplishment of this royal plan, a list of very specific demands followed. First, no prefecture or mission was to be established for foreign missionaries in the territories under the jurisdiction of the King. Secondly, the French missionaries of the Holy Spirit were to withdraw from the two or three stations under their care, so that Belgian missionaries could take over. Third, Charles Lavigerie's White Fathers were also to leave all the stations between Stanley-Falls and the ocean and where there were Belgian stations. The White Fathers had, however, the royal permission to remain in the ter-

27 ASV, ANB, 49, fasc. 11 (unnumbered folio). Domenico Ferrata to Giovanni Simeoni, 4 September 1886.

ritories between the Stanley-Falls and Tanganika and where there were no Belgian stations. In those territories, Lavigerie was to keep his jurisdiction.[28] The fifth and last demand is Leopold's open claim of his right to keep control over the missionary dossier in his African State through a direct intervention in the appointment of the missionary leaderships. Although Belgian missionaries assigned by the King to the Congo were to receive their authority directly from the Propaganda Fide, the ecclesiastical jurisdiction throughout the territories of the EIC was to be conferred upon a Belgian prelate, chosen after a common agreement between the King and the Holy See.[29]

Rome responded to Leopold's demands with total cooperation. On 18 September 1886, the Cardinal Prefect of the Propaganda Fide, Giovanni Simeoni informed Ferrata that he had immediately (*senza frappore indugio*) notified the Superior-General of the Spiritans of the deliberation of the EIC's Government.[30] Leopold's demands allowed him to largely control the missionary leadership in his territory and shield himself both against the Roman centralism and the liabilities linked to foreign missionaries (at least until a French missionary by the name Prosper Augouard, who had worked in the territories of the AIA, shook things up in 1894).

5 Conclusion

In the present study, I discussed the contexts and the mechanisms of the involvement of the Catholic Church in the opening years of the Leopoldian projects in Africa. The Holy See was only one among many supporters of Leopold's adventure in Africa. In a period when the papacy occupied a marginal place in international politics and the empires had become the catalysts of globalization, the Catholic Church could simply not afford to discard the participation in Leopold's African adventure. Besides, the "humanitarian" King's projects brought about unique missionary opportunities. Joining the choir of supporters of Leopold's African projects seemed to be the only wise choice for the Holy See. That decision found anchorage in the inputs by leading missionary authorities who contended that Leopold's operations in Africa represented a unique opportunity not only to recover some abandoned missions, but also to establish new ones in the so far unreached interior of Africa. All that, they urged

28 Ibidem.

29 Ibidem.

30 ASV, ANB, 49, fasc. 11 (unnumbered folio). Giovanni Simeoni to Domenico Ferrata, 18 September 1886.

Rome, had to be done quickly before the Protestants managed to control all the major mission stations in the region. Obviously, the rhetoric of the anti-slavery effort was another major stimulus for the Catholic Church to endorse and take an active part in the Leopoldian projects. Monseigneur Lavigerie's *Mémorie secret* of 1878 was clear in this aspect: given that the AIA was not fulfilling its duty of suppressing slavery and the slave trade, the Church should undertake an anti-slavery crusade in Central Africa in order to lever the moral authority of the Pope and restore the Church's honour. With such strong incentives, the critical stances among certain Catholic circles in Belgium because of the AIA's ties to the Protestants were essentially lone voices crying in the wilderness.

The configuration of the relationship between Leopold and the Catholic authorities (both in Belgium and in Rome) as well as some defining elements of the missionary occupation (such as the Catholic-Protestant competition/rivalries) during the early years of the King's African adventure are crucial to explain the attitudes of the Holy See and of the Belgian Catholic authorities towards the controversies revolving around State-sanctioned slavery and other atrocities in the mid-1890s and 1900s. From the beginning the Holy See conceded to all demands and requests from Leopold, including in the appointments to episcopacy in Belgium (Viaene, 2009: 175–176). From the beginning, the King also controlled the missionary leadership in the Congo. Despite the discourse of common understanding to choose the missionary leadership in the Congo, the way things worked in practice was virtually the monarch appointing his most trusted men for the job and the Holy See confirming the royal appointees. Leopold took the control of the missions and of the missionaries very seriously. It is important to mention that, while field missionaries in the other African colonies depended on the support and protection of the governments of their countries, Belgian missionaries stationed in the Congo had one absolute King/patron/protector/employer/benefactor and the like – Leopold. In him, the Catholic enterprise in the Congo had a "*protettore ben potente*" (a powerful protector) as Cardinal Rampolla put it in a letter of 26 March 1889, addressed to Domenico Ferrata, apostolic nuncio in Brussels.[31]

Simply put, Leopold had the full backing of the Holy See (Leo XIII was his staunchest supporter to the very end) and controlled the Catholic leadership in Belgium. This enabled him to fully control the missionary dossier of his EIC. The field missionaries depended on him. Losing Leopold's support and protection was to lose the Congo, and most likely to the Protestants. Neither the Holy See nor the leading Catholic authorities in Belgium were willing to

31 ASV, ANB 51, fascicolo 28 (unnumbered folio). Rampolla to Ferrata, 26 March, 1889.

let that happen. Obviously, there were other relevant reasons that were not yet present in the early years discussed here. The way the Holy See and the Catholic leadership in Belgium read the national and the international political games of the 1890s and 1900s was paramount to explain the behaviours of the Church. The alignment with the political status quo in Belgium (i.e. keeping the Catholic party in power) explains the deliberate choice of the Catholic Church and missionaries to remain silent on the atrocities in the Congo. In fact, it was clear that there could be hardly any Catholic missions in the Congo without the King's support. The support, protection, and the privileges the Catholic missionaries enjoyed were contingent upon the unwavering support of the Catholic Church. For all these reasons, for the sake of the Catholic missions in the Congo, the Catholic Church closed the ranks and defended its patron.

One is normally shocked when one learns how the missionaries defended the Leopoldian regime for such a long time. The shock is understandable. But to fully grasp the Catholic Church and its missionaries' blind loyalty to that atrocious regime one must look carefully into the configurations of the King's projects in its origins.

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